THE FIVE PROOFS OF SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

AS ONE DEFINITION OF GOD

Thomas Aquinas was the foremost Christian philosopher

in the Roman Catholic Church.

He was born in 1224 and died in 1274.

His chief contribution

was a fusion of Christian theology with the science of Aristotle.

We shall be looking at how Thomas Aquinas

attempted five proofs for the existence of God.

We also shall be looking at the objections to each of his five proofs.

One reason that his five proofs are part of the history of world religions

is that Aquinas was not only addressing his argument to Christians.

He also was addressing his argument

to Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians.

In his five proofs, the basic purpose of Aquinas

was to use scientific observation

to prove or demonstrate the existence of his God:

the eternal, infinite Being which is the source of all creation.

Let’s begin with Proof # 1: The Argument From Motion

1. Some things are moved.
2. Everything that is moved was moved by something else, etc., etc.
3. This regression of movers cannot be infinite,

because then we could not have reached the present mover.

4. Therefore there must be a first mover, and this mover is God.

The objections to the Argument From Motion are that

1) Aquinas mistakenly assumes that a motion is governed by logical necessity. He confuses logical necessity with physical causation.

What is logically necessary may not hold in the real physical world.

2) An infinite series of motions is possible. The universe could be a process of infinite beings-in-transformations, in which an infinite or indefinite series of motions is possible.

PROOF #2: THE ARGUMENT FROM CAUSE

1. There are causes.

2. Those causes are caused by other causes, etc., etc.

3. There can be no infinite regression of causes,

because then we could not have reached the present cause.

The Objections to the Argument From Cause

1) Some causes may not be causes

but coincidences or spontaneous juxtapositions,

and thus the argument for a chain of causes is broken.

This objection comes from The 18th century British philosopher David Hume.

2) Another objection to both Proofs #1 and #2 is that

even if they lead to a first cause, or a beginning of the universe,

the arguments do not prove that this first cause is God,

nor do they prove that this first cause is good.

3) Another objection is from

20th century British philosopher Bertrand Russell.

Russell says that Aquinas mistakes the whole for the parts.

Russell says that while it does make sense to seek

a cause of particular things in the universe,

it makes no sense to seek a cause for the universe as a whole.

Against Aquinas, Russell says,

“I see no reason whatsoever to suppose

that the total has any cause whatsoever . . . .

[The] concept of cause is not applicable to the total . . . .

I should say that the universe is just there, and that’s all.

4) Even if a first cause is accepted,

there is no proof that the first cause is either singular or eternal.

This also undercuts the attempt of Aquinas

to turn his first cause into God.

PROOF #3: THE ARGUMENT FROM NECESSARY BEING

1) Things either exist or not exist.

2) It is necessary that at some time none of these things would exist.

3) Since things do exist, therefore they must participate in necessary being.

Objections to the Argument from Necessary Being

1) Aquinas commits the fallacy of “begging the question,” because he assumes the existence of necessary being rather than proving its existence.

2) 20th century British philosopher J.J.C. Smart said Aquinas made a mistake of believing that the word “necessary” could apply to things.

Smart says that the word “necessary” can apply only to necessary propositions, such as 2+2=4.

Smart says it is absurd to say that a thing is necessary.

PROOF #4: THE ARGUMENT FROM DEGREES OR GRADATION

1) There are degrees which occur in things, such as degrees of heat,

degrees of goodness, etc.

2) That which contains the greatest goodness and greatest perfection is God.

The Objection:

The problem here is that Aquinas has not proven

that the greatest degree is in fact absolute.

He has only established that there are greater and lesser degrees.

PROOF #5: THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

1) Things in the world display order, intelligence, and purpose.
2) Therefore they operate according to a higher, intelligent Being

who is God.

Objections:

1) The order in the universe does not require the existence of God.
2) Defects of order and intelligence, such as disease or purposeful crime, weaken the argument.

SUMMARY

We have Proofs 1, 2, and 3, from motion, cause, and necessary being,

which are proofs based on measurement.

We also have Proofs 4 and 5, from degrees and design,

which are proofs based on valuation.

The main problem with all 5 proofs is that

they have a tendency to assume what they want to prove.

This logical fallacy is called begging the question, or *petitio principii*.

Bertrand Russell attacks Aquinas:

“There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas.

He does not . . . set out to follow wherever the argument may lead.

He is not engaged in an inquiry,

the result of which it is impossible to know in advance.

Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth;

it is declared in the Catholic faith.

If he can find apparently better rational arguments

for some parts of the faith, so much the better;

if he cannot he need only fall back on revelation

[i.e., his direct knowledge of God].

The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance

is not philosophy but special pleading.

I cannot, therefore, feel that Aquinas deserves to be put on a level

with the best philosophers either of Greece or of modern times.” [Russell, AHWP]

Russell’s attack reveals Russell’s own philosophical bias.

If you take the 5 arguments of Aquinas

as scientific proofs for the existence of God,

of course they are subject to attack from someone like Bertrand Russell.

But if you remove the arguments of Aquinas

from the realm of scientific proof and place his arguments

into the context of religious faith,

then you see something very interesting begins to happen.

No longer is Aquinas seen as a struggling theologian

trying to convince scientists about the existence of God.

Instead, Aquinas becomes a professor of faith in God.

Then his words function not as a scientific proof but as a confession of faith.

Then Aquinas is not trying to prove anything to you;

he is trying to reveal his faith to you.

Then you begin to see the 5 arguments of Aquinas

as defining the experience of God that Aquinas in fact had.

So what Aquinas is doing in his 5 arguments is not a proving anything at all.

What he’s doing is professing his theological understanding and confessing his faith in the presence of God.

Then what Aquinas is doing is using logic and science not to prove,

but to reveal, the Being of God.

Then what he is doing is helping us experience his God

in a way that cannot be done by science alone,

as the infinite and eternal Being, the source of all creation.

+